

Fish & Wildlife Commission Agenda Item Cover Sheet

Meeting Date: March 13, 2014

Agenda Item: Beartooth WMA Whitetail Prairie Addition

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Endorse Course of Action

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 15 minutes

Background:

Whitetail Prairie is a 2,840-acre native Intermountain/Foothill Grassland parcel adjoining the 32,320-acre Beartooth Wildlife Management Area (BTWMA). The property is located in the Big Belt Mountains about 25 miles northeast of Helena in Lewis and Clark County. Whitetail Prairie also includes grazing leases on an additional 200 acres of BLM and 640 acres of DNRC lands adjacent to their deeded property. The acquisition would allow FWP to positively maintain and/or enhance 3,680 acres of Native Intermountain habitats as part of the BTWMA in perpetuity. BTWMA provides winter range for approximately 1,500 elk. The Whitetail Prairie property is a part of the same habitat and is heavily used by wintering elk. Along with the benefits of vegetation management, the property also provides recreational access to an additional 880 acres of currently inaccessible DNRC and BLM lands, thus providing a total of 3,720 acres of recreational access. FWP's Habitat MT Program looks to partner with the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF) and a variety of other organizations on the purchase. RMEF has indicated a significant commitment towards the project thus far.

Public Involvement Process & Results:

Future involvement to complete the proposed fee title purchase will include an appraisal and Environmental Assessment process together with standard press releases, website notification, notification of adjacent landowners, a public hearing, and presentations for final approval to the F&W Commission and the State Land Board.

Alternatives and Analysis:

Preferred Alternative A: This alternative is to purchase in fee the Whitetail Prairie addition to BTWMA.

Alternative B: This alternative is to purchase a conservation easement on the Whitetail Prairie property. This alternative is of no interest to the landowners thus an easement is not an option at this time.

Alternative C: This is the "no action" alternative. FWP would not purchase the property fee title. This would result in a loss of opportunity to: protect and/or enhance critical native habitats adjoining the BTWMA; increase the size of the WMA; increase recreational opportunity. With no action, the land would most likely be sold in the near future to landowners with potentially differing interests than the current landowners.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale:

The Department recommends approval by the F&W Commission to proceed with landowner negotiations as the Whitetail Prairie property is key to conserving important elk winter range that is integral to the Beartooth WMA.

Proposed Motion:

I move the Commission endorse the Department's recommendation to proceed with Landowner negotiations and associated work toward fee title purchase of the Whitetail Prairie addition to Beartooth WMA.